

WHAT IS LIVING AND WHAT IS DEAD IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HEGEL

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1. The Dialectic or Synthesis of Opposites

Hegel is one of those philosophers who took philosophy itself, not just immediate reality, as the object of his thought, thereby contributing to the development of a logic of philosophy. To me, in fact, it seems that the logic of philosophy (with the results that come from it for solving particular problems and for thinking about life) was the mark at which he aimed his greatest mental effort. In it he found – or brought to completion and made more effective – principles of great importance which had been unknown to previous philosophers or scarcely mentioned by them and can therefore be considered real discoveries of his.

This concept of a logic of philosophy is simple enough and should be accepted on incontrovertible evidence, yet it encounters a strange aversion – aversion to the very idea, that philosophy proceeds by its own method with a theory that is to be investigated and formulated. No one doubts that mathematics has a method of its own, studied in the logic of mathematics; that the natural sciences have their method, the source of the logic of observation, experiment and abstraction; that there is a method of writing history and therefore a logic of historical method; that for poetry and art in general there is a logic of poetry and art, or aesthetics; that there is a method inherent in economic activity that appears later in reflective form in the science of economics; and finally that moral activity has its own method, presented in reflective form as ethics (or a logic of the will, as it has sometimes been called). But then, as we move on to philosophy, a great many people resist what follows: that philosophy too, once it exists, must have a method of its own, which must be defined. On the other hand, very few are surprised when treatises on logic, which give a great deal of space to discussions of mathematical and scientific disciplines, usually pay no special attention to the philosophical disciplines and often pass right by them in silence.

That anyone who rejects philosophy in general, whether from thoughtlessness or mental confusion or eccentricity, should reject a logic of philosophy is perfectly natural since one cannot claim to accept the theory of something whose reality has been disallowed. There is no philosophy, so there is no logic of philosophy, and that's the end of it; if this is good enough, enjoy it. But why have I just been talking about a strange spectacle? The reason is that philosophers themselves – or philosophizers, perhaps – too often seem to show themselves lacking any awareness of this inevitable necessity. One of them asserts that philosophy must follow the abstract-deductive method of mathematics; and another sees no other way to save it but to hold firmly to the experimental method, dreaming and boasting of a philosophy studied in laboratories and clinics, an empirical metaphysics, and so forth. Finally (and this fashion is the most recent, newly on offer, if not new) the custom now is to recommend an individual and imaginary philosophy produced like art. All methods (from the compass to the scalpel and eventually the guitar) seem useful for philosophy, then, except the philosophical.

To counter such beliefs, one observation should suffice: namely, that if philosophy is to produce understanding and be the reflective consciousness of art and history, of mathematics and inquiry into nature, of practical and moral activity, it is not clear how it could do so by conforming to the method of one of those particular topics. Presented with a poem, anyone who limits himself to applying the method of poetry will feel in himself the poet's creation, one particular work of art or another, but he will not reach the philosophical understanding of poetry by this route. Presented with a mathematical theory, anyone who limits himself to doing mathematics will be the disciple, the critic, the fulfiller of that theory, but he will not reach understanding of the real nature of mathematical work. If philosophy's object is not to produce or reproduce art and mathematics and various other human activities but to comprehend (understand) them all, this comprehending itself is an activity with its own method, infused or implied, and it is important to make it explicit.

There is no hope of understanding and evaluating Hegel's work, however, unless one always keeps the problem I have identified firmly in mind as his chief problem and great problem – the problem central to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and the new presentations of this work in the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*. A complete account of Hegel's thought, an internal and critical account, cannot be like almost all histories of philosophy or even the specialized monographs that deal with Hegel – the recent and very extensive treatment by Kuno Fischer, for example. It cannot be an abbreviated repetition of the content of his books, awkwardly faithful down to section and chapter divisions. It should be devoted primarily and mainly to his position on the nature of philosophical inquiry and on the differences between such inquiry and other theoretical and non-theoretical forms.

Above all, this account should clarify the threefold character assumed by philosophical thinking, according to Hegel, in relation to the three mental modes or attitudes with which it is usually most readily **identified/confused** [*scambiarlo*]. Philosophical thinking for Hegel is (a) concept; (b) universal; and (c) concrete. It is concept, meaning that it is not feeling or rapture or intuition or any such psychic state ungoverned by logic and devoid of demonstrative force. This settles the difference between philosophy and theories of mysticism or direct knowing. At best, these have negative value in that they recognize the impossibility of basing philosophy on the method of the empirical and natural sciences, sciences of the finite. They are profound, if you like, but theirs is an “empty profundity.” Against mysticism, mania, melancholy, the raising of eyes to heaven, the bending of necks and wringing of hands, against swooning, gnomic prophecy and mystical initiatory formulas, Hegel becomes fiercely satirical, always insisting that philosophy must have a reasoned and intelligible form, that it must be “not esoteric but exoteric,” the property not of a sect but of humanity.

The philosophical concept is universal, certainly not a mere generality and not to be confused with general representations such as ‘house,’ ‘horse,’ or ‘blue.’ By a usage that Hegel terms barbaric, however, these are ordinarily called concepts. This settles the difference between philosophy and the empirical or natural sciences, which are satisfied with types and class concepts.

Finally, the philosophical universal is concrete, not turning reality into a skeleton but grasping it in its fullness and richness. Philosophical abstractions are not arbitrary but necessary, and therefore they are adequate to reality, not mutilating or falsifying it. This settles the difference between philosophy and the mathematical disciplines. These do not justify their starting points but ‘rule on them.’ Hence, as Hegel says, one must obey the rule for drawing these lines or those correctly, always trusting that this will be something ‘appropriate’ to the process of demonstration. The object of philosophy, by contrast, is what really is, and it must justify itself fully, permitting no assumptions and treating none as valid.¹

To elucidate the threefold difference that shows the true concept, the philosophical concept to be logical, universal and concrete, and to give a full account of it, one would need to pursue smaller problems connected with the first and fundamental problem. Some of these are of great importance, such as reviving the ontological argument (defending St. Anselm against Kant) that in the philosophical concept – as distinct from representations of the particular – essence implies existence; such as providing a doctrine of ‘judgment,’ which, when treated as the link between subject and predicate, is based on something mentally indeterminate and unsuited to philosophy, whose true form is a ‘syllogism’ having the logical character of reconnecting the concept with itself; such as criticizing the theory that considers the concept a complex of ‘marks’ (which Hegel calls the true ‘mark’ of superficiality in ordinary logic); such as criticizing divisions by species and class; such as proving the uselessness (in our day this may be therapeutic) of every ‘logical calculus’; and quite a few other things.

But my purpose in these pages is not to give a complete account of Hegel’s system, not even his logical teaching alone. Instead, I shall focus all my attention on the most characteristic part of his thought, on new features of truth revealed by him and on errors that he left standing or in which he was complicit. Thus, setting aside the various issues that I have just briefly noted (rebellious against them seems to me impossible, even granted that one must promote learning by treating such problems as a philosophical alphabet, now often unlearned), I come straight to the point that sparks all the debates and where the sharp objections of opponents are aimed – the treatment of the problem of opposites.

If we want to understand the seriousness and difficulty of this problem, we must have a clear and precise sense of its terms. Because of its concreteness, the philosophical concept (which is a concrete universal, as we have noted) actually includes in itself the distinctions and does not exclude them: the concept is the universal, distinct in itself, and it results from those distinctions. As empirical concepts are divided into classes and sub-classes, in the same way this philosophical concept has its own particular forms, but rather than being the mechanical aggregate of them, it is the organism in which every form joins closely with the others and with the whole. Imagination and understanding are particular philosophical concepts, for example, related to the concept of spirit or spiritual activity. But they are not outside or beneath spirit; in fact, they are spirit itself in those

¹See especially the introduction to the *Phenomenology* and the preliminaries to the *Encyclopedia*.

particular forms. One is not separate from the other, then, like two entities, each closed in itself and outside the other. Hence, while imagination may be distinct from understanding, it is the foundation of understanding and indispensable to it, as people often say.

Yet when our thinking investigates what is real, it faces not only distinct concepts but also opposed concepts that cannot simply be identified with the former nor treated as special cases of them, as a type of the distinct. The logical category of distinction is one thing, the category of opposition another. Two distinct concepts are connected, as has been said, even in being distinct, while two opposed concepts seem to exclude one another: where one appears, the other totally vanishes. A distinct concept is assumed and lives in the other that follows it in the order of ideas. An opposed concept is destroyed by its opposite: the saying that applies to it is *mors tua, vita mea*.

Examples of distinct concepts are those of imagination and understanding, already mentioned, as well as others that could be added – law, morality and so on. But examples of opposed concepts come from the many pairs of words that abound in our language, and they are certainly not happy, loving pairs. They are oppositions of true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, valued and unvalued, joy and sorrow, activity and passivity, positive and negative, life and death, being and nothing, and on and on. It is not possible to confuse the two series, the distinct and the opposite, which are so strikingly different.

If distinction does not exclude the concrete unity of the philosophical concept but actually makes it possible, it seems that the same notion cannot apply to opposition. Opposition gives rise to deep cleavages in the core of the philosophical universal and its particular forms, and unresolvable dualisms as well. Instead of the concrete universal, the organic reality that thinking seeks, it seems to come up against two universals everywhere, one confronting the other, one threatening the other. This prevents philosophy from achieving its aim, and when an activity cannot achieve its aim, this shows that the goal it has set itself is absurd, and philosophy itself – all philosophy – is threatened with failure.

This grave and urgent situation has always caused the human mind to be troubled by the problem of opposites but without always giving a clear account of its trouble. And one solution to which people have constantly clung over the centuries has been to exclude opposition from the philosophical concept by claiming that this dangerous logical category is not real. The facts actually showed the opposite, if truth were told, but facts met with denial, and only one of the two terms was accepted while the other was declared an ‘illusion’ – or else a difference of greater and less was applied to the two terms, which amounts to the same thing. This logical doctrine of opposites turns up again in the philosophical systems of sensism, empiricism, materialism, mechanism and whatever else one may call them. From time to time, thinking and truth appeared in these systems as a secretion from the brain or an effect of association and habit, virtue as a mirage of egoism, beauty a distillate of sensuality, the ideal some vague dream of pleasure or caprice, and more of the same.

Against this first logical doctrine another one has shown strength over the centuries, positing the category of opposition as fundamental. We find it in the various dualist systems that reassert the antinomy whisked away by advocates of the first system with a quick wave of the hand. These systems emphasize both terms, being and non-being, good and evil, true and false, ideal and real, the members of one series precisely contrasted with those of the other. As against abstract monism, the dualist conception clearly adds value, the polemical value of denying its denial. At bottom, however, the one offers as little as the other because where the first sacrifices opposition to unity, the second sacrifices unity to opposition.

Both these sacrifices turn out to be so incompatible with thinking that proponents of one doctrine keep being converted, more or less consciously, into proponents of the other. Advocates of unity covertly introduce the duality of opposites by expressing it metaphorically as the duality of reality and illusion, an illusion they could dispense with no more than reality, so they often end up saying that in the illusion is the impulse to live. All advocates of opposition accept some sort of identity or unity of opposites, inaccessible to the human mind because of its imperfection, but needed for thinking that can stand up to reality. In this way, both sides get tangled up in contradictions and end up realizing that they have not solved the problem that was bothering them, that it still remains an open problem.

The reason is that 'necessary illusion' or 'necessary imperfection of the human mind' are meaningless noises, no matter how hard we try to give them meaning. Accidental and relative illusions, particular and relative imperfections are all we know. A reality beyond reality, a mind beyond the human mind is not conceivable and cannot be a term of comparison. Reality and mind both show us unity as well as opposition. When advocates of unity accept one and advocates of opposition accept the other, they are right in what they accept and wrong in what they deny – as Leibniz said about philosophical systems. Hegel never tired of marvelling at the manly perseverance of every kind of materialist, sensist and monist in asserting the unity of the real. In the dualist types, given the historical circumstances in which his thought developed, Hegel found less to marvel at; in fact, he never passed up a chance to record his dislike of them. He never forgot, however, that consciousness of opposition is just as invincible and justified as consciousness of unity.

The situation seems hopeless, then, but hopelessness is also hopeless, one might say, since the decision to call the problem insoluble would be a decision to think whether, by the act of thinking, we had already chosen the side of thought, which is the side of hope. A neutral observer who looks at the history philosophy sees that a restoration of dualism follows every acceptance of monism, and vice versa. Each lacks the power to stifle the other, but each has enough power to hold the other in check temporarily. It almost appears that when people have had enough monist uniformity, they divert themselves with dualist variety, and when they tire of dualism, they plunge into monism again, as the two processes balance each other in a healthy way.

With every epidemic of materialism, the neutral observer smiles and says, 'Wait! Spiritualism will be here any moment.' And while spiritualism is celebrating its greatest triumphs, the observer smiles in the same way and says, 'Wait! Materialism will be right back.' But the observer's smile is forced and soon goes away because his situation is not really a happy one. Tossed from one extreme to the other as if an external and irresistible force were acting on him, he has no peace.

And yet, amidst the difficulties that I have revealed, there is a secret conviction deep in our hearts that this irresistible dualism and this insoluble dilemma may, in the end, be resisted and solved, that the thought of unity is not incompatible with that of opposition, and that opposition can and must be thought in the form of the concept, which is the highest unity. Ordinary thinking – which is usually called non-philosophical and might better be called summarily or potentially philosophical – is not perplexed by difficulty. It thinks unity and opposition at the same time. The saying that applies to it is definitely not *mors tua, vita mea*, but *concordia discors*. It recognizes that life is struggle but also harmony; that virtue is a battle against ourselves but also is ourselves; that once an opposition has been overcome, a new opposition arises from the very core of unity, and then a new overcoming followed by a new opposition, and so on, which is exactly how life works.

Ordinary thinking does not recognize exclusive systems. Proverbial wisdom runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds, admonishing us with optimistic and pessimistic remarks denied and then affirmed in turn. What is missing from ordinary thinking, from potential philosophy? Nothing, apparently. Therefore, amidst the smoke and dust of learned combat, we always long for good sense, for the truth that each of us can find in ourselves directly, without the exertions, subtleties and exaggerations of professional philosophers. But our longing is futile. The battle has been joined, and without a victory there is no returning to peace.

Ordinary thinking (this is its defect) is in no position to account for its own claims. At every objection, it wavers, falls into confusion and contradicts itself. Its truths are not complete truths because they are not joined together but placed next to one another, and juxtaposition is not systematic. Contradictions, doubts and a painful awareness of antinomies are welcome. War is welcome if it is needed to acquire the truth that is complete and certain in itself. This truth, though rather different in level of elaboration from what comes out of common, ordinary thinking, cannot really be unlike it in substance, and when a philosophy stands in contrast to ordinary consciousness, it is a sure sign of trouble. Indeed, when people see simple statements of philosophical truth resulting from centuries of effort, this is the very reason why we often see them shrugging their shoulders and remarking that a proud discovery is something quite simple that everybody knows. Exactly the same thing happens with the most inspired works of art, which develop so simply and naturally that everyone has the illusion of having done such things or being able to do them.

If ordinary thinking provides hope and a sign of compatibility between unity and opposition, another form of the spirit's making, familiar to everyone's experience, offers

a rough model of these benefits. Alongside the philosopher stands the poet. The poet also seeks the truth; the poet also thirsts for the real; like the philosopher, he too rejects arbitrary abstractions while reaching for the living and concrete; he too abhors the mute delusions of mystics and sentimentalists because he says what he feels and makes it ring in our ears, clear and silvery, in words of beauty.

But the poet is not doomed to failure. He contemplates the reality which is torn apart by oppositions and makes it vibrant with opposition, yet one and undivided. Will the philosopher not do the same? Is philosophy not a way of knowing, like poetry? Since the philosophical concept is completely analogous to aesthetic expression, why must it lack the perfection that belongs to the aesthetic, the power to resolve unity in opposition and represent it? Philosophy is knowing the universal, obviously, and hence it is thinking, while poetry is knowing the individual, and hence it is intuition and imagination. But why can the philosophical universal not be different and the same, discord and concord, separate and continuous, precise and fluid all at once, like aesthetic expression? When the mind makes its leap from contemplating the particular to contemplating the all, why should reality have to lose its own character? Does the One not live in us like the particular?

And at this point Hegel shouts his joyous cry, his cry of discovery – eureka! – the basis of a solution for the problem of opposites, a very simple basis and so obvious that it deserves to be placed right alongside those symbolized by Columbus and his egg. Opposites are not illusions, and unity is not an illusion. Opposites are opposed to one another, but they are not opposed to unity because true and concrete unity is just the unity or synthesis of opposites: it is not immobility, it is movement; it is not stasis, but development. The philosophical concept is a concrete universal, and therefore it is a thinking of reality as both united and divided at once. Only in this way does philosophical truth correspond to poetic truth, and the pulse of thought to the pulse in things.

This is the only possible solution, in fact, and as such it does not reject the two that came before it, those that I have named ‘monism’ and ‘dualism of opposites.’ Instead, it justifies both by treating them as truths that are one-sided, fragments of truth that need to be integrated in a third truth, where the first, the second and also the third fade away as all three are fused in the sole truth. And the sole truth is that unity does not confront opposition but contains it in itself, that without opposition reality would not be reality because it would not be development and life. Unity is positive, opposition negative, but the negative is also positive, positive in being negative, and, if it were not so, we would not grasp the positive in its fullness.

If the analogy between poetry and philosophy was unsatisfactory, if the concrete concept, corresponding to intuition as the logical form of development – as its poetic form – seemed not clear enough, now that we take our comparisons and metaphors more freely from the natural sciences, one might say (sacrificing exact analogy for apt comparison) that the concrete universal, along with the synthesis of opposites, gets at life and not at life’s corpse. It offers a physiology of the real, not an anatomy.

Hegel calls his doctrine of opposites the *dialectic*, rejecting other formulas of unity and coincidence of opposites as likely to cause confusion because they emphasize unity but not opposition along with it. The two abstract terms, or rather the opposites taken by themselves, in their apartness, he calls *moments*, taking the image from moments of the lever. The third term, synthesis, is also sometimes called a moment. He uses the word 'resolve' or 'overcome' (*aufheben*) to express the relation of the first two moments to the third. Hegel notes the implication that the two moments are negated insofar as they are taken as separate, while in synthesis they are conserved. In relation to the first term, the second takes the form of *negation*, and in relation to the second, the third is a *negation of negation*, or absolute negativity which then becomes absolute affirmation.

If we apply numerical symbols to this logical relation for the sake of explanation, the dialectic can be called a *triad* or *trinity* because it turns out to be composed of three terms. But Hegel never stops warning about the external and arbitrary character of this numerical symbolism, which is quite unfit to express the theoretical truth. Strictly speaking, what is thought in the dialectical triad is not three concepts but only one, the concrete universal, in its deep structure. Moreover, since we must first of all posit opposition of terms in order to achieve this synthesis, if we call the activity that posits opposition *understanding*, and *reason* the activity that provides the synthesis, it is clear that understanding is necessary to reason, a moment of reason and external to it. And this is actually how Hegel sometimes treats it.

Anyone who does not rise to the way of thinking the opposites that I have just described can make no philosophical claim that does not contradict itself and change to its contrary, as I noted in reviewing the antinomies of monism and dualism. We can see this in the first triad of Hegel's *Logic* – the triad that has in it all the others and which, as we know, is made up of the terms *being*, *nothing* and *becoming*. Without nothing, what is being? What is pure being, indeterminate, unqualified, indistinct, unutterable, being in general, and not this or that particular being? How does it differ from nothing? On the other hand, what is nothing without being, nothing conceived in itself, with no determination or qualification, nothing in general, not the non-being of this or that particular thing? How does it differ from being?

When someone uses one of these two terms by itself, the result is like using the other by itself, since the one has meaning only in or through the other. Someone who uses the true without the false, then, makes the true into something not thought (since thinking is a struggle against the false) and therefore something not true. Likewise, for someone who uses good without evil, the good becomes something not willed (because willing the good is rejecting evil) and therefore something not good. Outside of synthesis, the two terms used abstractly become confused with one another as they trade roles. Truth comes only with the third term, which, for the first triad, is becoming. Thus, as Hegel said, it is 'the first concrete concept.'

And yet this mistake, which comes of using the opposites outside of synthesis, keeps recurring. We must always respond to it with the objection that shows – as we showed just now – that the opposites cannot be thought outside of synthesis. This objection is the

dialectic that might be called 'subjective' or 'negative.' But it must not be confused with the true and proper content of this theory, with the objective or positive dialectic that could also be identified as the logical theory of development. In the negative dialectic, the outcome is not synthesis but the annihilation of two opposed terms, one as a result of the other. Therefore, like the word 'dialectic' itself, the terminology that we described above also acquires a somewhat different meaning. *Understanding* is now taken in a derogatory and pejorative sense since it is no longer a moment intrinsic to reason and inseparable from it, but rather an affirmation of separate opposites that claims to stand on its own as the final truth. This is *abstract understanding*, the eternal enemy of philosophical theorizing – basically, reason itself going wrong in its own work. 'Understanding is not to blame if we go no farther; it is a subjective weakness of reason which lets that determination stand in that way.'² The triad itself surrenders its place to a tetrad of terms, two affirmations and two negations. Reason steps in as negative reason and brings confusion into the house of understanding. Although it clears the way for the positive theory by this negation and makes it necessary, it does not produce or posit it.

Confusion between the merely negative aspects of Hegel's dialectic and its positive content has given rise to an objection against the Hegelian theory of opposites, and this is a war-horse often mounted by Hegel's enemies. Rosinante is rather old and worn out, and I fail to see how anyone can still stay in the saddle. They say: if being and nothing are identical (as Hegel proves or thinks he proves), how can they produce becoming, which (on Hegel's theory) must be a synthesis of opposites, certainly not of things that are identical and thus unproductive of synthesis? $A = A$ remains A and does not become B . And the answer is: being is identical with nothing only when being and nothing are badly thought, or, indeed, when they are not thought; only then does it happen that one is the same as the other, not as $A = A$ but as $0 = 0$.

In thinking that truly thinks being and nothing, they are not identical but definitely opposed, brawling with one another. And this brawl (which is also a bonding because the two wrestlers have to put their arms around one another in order to wrestle) is becoming. This is certainly not a concept added to or derived from the two others as if they were apart from it. It is a unique concept such that outside it are two abstractions, two unreal specters, being and nothing as separate and hence as united not by conflict but by the emptiness that they have in common.

Another objection, seemingly triumphant again, is the observation that the concrete universal, with its synthesis of opposites sealing its concrete character, is not a purely logical concept because it implicitly introduces sensible or intuitive elements when it represents movement or development. Sensible or intuitive? That would mean singular, individual, historical – strictly speaking. Please, what is the singular, individual, historical element that we can either point out in Hegel's concept of the universal or take it away, in the way that we can either locate the singular, individual, historical element in the empirical concept of 'oak,' 'whale,' or 'feudal government' or take it away? Movement or development is nothing singular and contingent; it is universal. It is

²*Wissensch. der Logik*, III, 48.

nothing sensible; it is a thought, a concept, and the true concept of reality exactly. And the logical theory of this concept is the concrete universal, a synthesis of opposites.

But what if the meaning of that objection had been to indicate a feature which the concept has in Hegel's logic, its not being something empty and indifferent, not just a *receptacle* ready to receive any content at all, but rather the ideal form of reality itself? What if the meaning of 'logical' were only an abstraction that cannot be conceived, the abstraction that works 'on command,' as in mathematics? And what if the meaning of 'intuitive' were the speculative concept? Then the objection would demonstrate not Hegel's error but his real glory. And this is how we must see his having destroyed that false conception of logic as arbitrary abstraction and his having equipped the logical concept with the feature of concreteness, which can also be called 'intuitive' to signify (as I have done above) that Philosophy springs from the heart of godlike Poetry, 'from a fair mother a daughter fairer still.'

Philosophy, thus seen as poetry's friend and relative, enters the state now usually called 'Dionysian,' following Nietzsche's fashionable phrasing, and this is enough to scare off the faint-hearted. Without realizing it, however, even these thinkers are in the same condition as long as they keep philosophizing. Thus, when faced with the dialectic of being and non-being, our Rosmini exclaimed in horror: 'Even if it were as true as it is false that being can negate itself, this question would always come back into play: what was the move to self-negation? What reason could we find for this whim that being would have to negate itself, to refuse to recognize itself, to make this mad attempt to annihilate itself, in short? Hegel's system does nothing less than *make being go mad, introducing madness into each and every thing*. In this way he claims to give things their life, motion, process and becoming. But I have never heard of such an enterprise anywhere, whose effect is to make everything, even being itself, go mad.'³

Rosmini probably did not recall that Hegel himself (with more style, to tell the truth) gave the very same account in the *Phenomenology*. After describing the movement of reality, the rise and fall that has no birth or death, these were his concluding words: 'Truth is a Bacchic frenzy, and there is no part of it that is not intoxicated. Likewise, since each part immediately dissolves when the others withdraw from it, truth is also rest, simple and transparent.'⁴ Reality seems mad because it is life, and philosophy seems mad because it breaks abstractions and lives that life by thinking. This madness is the highest wisdom, then. The real and non-metaphorical madmen are those crazed by the empty words of semi-philosophy. They confuse constructs with reality and fail to ascend to that heaven where their effort might be revealed to them for what it really is. In fact, seeing heaven high above them and out of reach, they are ready to call it a madhouse.

Another manifestation of the same irrational fear is the outcry that such a logic deprives mankind of the very basis or rule of thinking, the principle of identity and contradiction. The evidence is Hegel's frequent display of bad temper against that principle, as well as his declaration that it must be replaced by the contrary principle, that everything is

³*Saggio storico-critico sulle categorie e la dialettica*, opera postuma (Torino, 1883), p. 371.

⁴*Phänom. d. Geistes*², p. 37.

contradictory. But this is not precisely how things are. Hegel does not deny the principle of identity. Otherwise, he would have to admit that his theory of logic is both true and not true, for example, both true and false, and that being and nothing can be thought philosophically in the synthesis and also outside of synthesis, each by itself. His whole argument, his whole philosophy would then no longer have meaning; it would lack a serious basis, though we can easily see that it is very serious.

Rather than destroying the principle of identity, Hegel gives it new strength, gives it power, makes it what it truly must be and what it is not in ordinary thinking. Ordinary thinking, semi-philosophy, leaves reality divided into two pieces, as we have seen. Now it is one of them, now the other, and when it is one, it is not the other. And yet, in this effort to exclude, one passes into the other and together they are reduced to nothing. We claim to justify these contradictions, which actually cannot be thought, and dress them up by adducing the principle of identity. If we examine only the words that Hegel uses, we can say that he distrusts the principle of identity. But if we look deeper, we notice that what he distrusts is just *the false use of the principle of identity*, the use made of it by the purveyors of abstraction who preserve unity by eliminating opposition or preserve opposition by eliminating unity.

As Hegel says, this is the principle of identity as ‘a law of abstract understanding.’ It arises because we do not want to acknowledge that opposition or contradiction is no defect, no blemish, no illness in things that can be removed from them – much less our own subjective error. Rather, it is the true being of things: all things in themselves are contradictory, and thinking is the thinking of contradiction. This is what really gives stability and solidity to the principle of identity, triumphing over opposition by thinking it, grasping it in its unity. Opposition *thought* is opposition *overcome*, overcome precisely in virtue of the principle of identity. Opposition disregarded or unity disregarded appears to obey that principle but, in fact, is its real contradiction.

The difference between Hegel’s way of thinking and the ordinary kind is what distinguishes confronting and conquering an enemy from closing one’s eyes in order to avoid seeing him: we think we are rid of him, and instead we become his quarry. ‘Speculative thinking is thought establishing opposition, and, in opposition, thinking itself; it does not, like representative thinking, permit opposition to dominate and, by way of opposition, allow its own determinations to be resolved only in other determinations or in none.’⁵ Reality is a nexus of opposites, and it does not come apart and dissipate as a result of opposition; in fact, reality originates in and from opposition eternally. And thinking, as the supreme reality, the reality of reality, does not come apart and dissipate but grasps unity in opposition and synthesizes it logically.

Like all assertions of truth, Hegel’s dialectic does not come to dethrone earlier truths but to confirm and enrich them. The concrete universal, unity in distinction and opposition, is the true and complete principle of identity. It does not allow the principle of older

⁵*Wissensch. d. Logik*, II, 67-8.

systems to exist apart from it, either as an ally or as a rival, having absorbed that principle by turning it into its own life's blood.

2. Clarifications of the History of the Dialectic

Some historians of philosophy have had the view that the problem of opposites exhausts the problem of philosophy, and so at times the history of the various attempts to solve it has been made to coincide with the entire history of philosophy: an account of the former has accounted for the latter. But the dialectic is not even all of logic, much less all philosophy. It is the most important part of logic, however, and perhaps its crowning achievement.

The reason for the confusion may already be clear from what I have said above: it is hidden in the inner bond that ties the logical problem of opposites to the great debates between monists and dualists, materialists and spiritualists. This makes up most of the content of studies and histories of philosophy, even though such debates do not represent philosophy's full and basic task, which is better expressed by 'know thyself.' But the aforesaid seeming coincidence will also disappear when we note that it is one thing to think logically, another to construct the theory of logic logically, one thing to think dialectically, another to have a logical conception of dialectical thought.

If this were not so, the Hegelian solution would already be perfectly clear in the many philosophers who have, in fact, thought dialectically about reality, or at least in all cases where they have thought about it in this way. Every problem of philosophy refers to all others, no doubt, and all can be found implicit in each one. Solutions right or wrong for one contain solutions right or wrong for all. But if it is impossible to keep histories of particular philosophical problems separate from one another, it is still true that these problems are distinct, and we must not make a muddle of the different parts of the organism if we are not to lose any notion of the organism itself.

Attention to this distinction is needed to set the limits of inquiry into the historical development of the dialectical theory of opposites and, as a consequence, the standing granted to this research and the originality recognized in Hegel's thought. Within these limits, it may be that such research has not yet been done in the right way. Moreover, since students of philosophy have not on the whole been convinced that the theory is important or correct, the interest required to track down its history, as well as a guiding criterion, are lacking. The best we have on the subject is in Hegel's own books, especially his *History of Philosophy*.⁶ It will be useful to summarize these scattered references here, making additions and comments as needed.

⁶See also the historical introduction to Kuno Fischer's *Logik und Metaphysik* (2nd ed., 1865) and Betrand Spaventa's *Prelude and Introduction to Lectures on Philosophy* (Naples, 1862; reprinted with a new title, *Italian Philosophy in Its Relations with European Philosophy*, by Gentile, Bari, 1908). For the immediate antecedents of Hegel's dialectic and the various phases of its development, see especially Al. Schmid, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der hegelischen Logik* (Regensburg, 1858).

Was Hegel the first to formulate the logical principle of dialectic and development? Or did he have predecessors, and who were they? What were the cruder forms through which this principle passed before reaching its final state in Hegel?

The theory of dialectic is a work of mature thinking, a product of long philosophical incubation. We find the the difficulties that arise from the concept of opposites first noted in ancient Greece, when Zeno of Elea denied the reality of movement. Movement is same thing as development but in a form more accessible to reflection. Zeno put great emphasis on these difficulties and resolved the conflict by denying that movement is real (using arguments from the contradiction between space and time, from the arrow, from Achilles and the tortoise and others). Movement is an illusion of the senses; being or reality is one and unmoving.

In opposition to Zeno, Heraclitus identified movement or becoming as the true reality. The depth of his attention to reality as contrariety and development shows in his sayings: 'being and non-being are the same'; 'everything is and also is not'; ' everything flows.' It shows in his metaphors: things are a river; opposition within opposition is like sweet and bitter in honey, like the bow and the lyre. It shows in his cosmological notions about war and peace, discord and harmony. Hegel said that Heraclitus made no claim which he did not incorporate into his own logic. But note that Hegel gave these claims a richer and thus different meaning than they had by themselves just because he did incorporate them into his theory. As we have them handed down to us, their clear and simple vision of the truth must obviously have great value, but we must not make too much of it, or else we run the risk of falsifying history by turning a pre-Socratic into a post-Kantian.

The same must be said of Plato's dialectic in the *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Philebus*, dialogues whose interpretation and historical location are quite controversial. Hegel thought of them as containing the essence of Platonic philosophy, the effort to move from the still abstract universal to the concrete universal, to posit the speculative form of the concept as unity in diversity. These dialogues raise questions about the one and the many, identity and non-identity, rest and movement, birth and death, being and non-being, finite and infinite, limited and unlimited. And the *Parmenides* concludes that the one is and is not, is itself and the other, and that things as related to themselves and as against others are and are not, are apparent and not apparent. All this shows a laboring with the problem that still produces a negative result. As Hegel warned, in any case, we find the dialectic in Plato, but not full consciousness of the nature of the dialectic. The power of Plato's theoretical reflection is greatly superior to the arguments of the Sophists or the later tropes of the Skeptics, but it does not reach the level of a theory of logic.

Of Aristotle we can say that his logical consciousness conflicts with his theoretical consciousness. His logic is merely cerebral, whereas his metaphysics investigates the categories.

In the teachings of Philo the Jew and the Gnostics, where true reality, absolute being, the undescrivable, the unfathomable abyss, is beyond the reach of thought, where everything is negated, there we find only a need, or rather an awareness of impotence and evidence

of what is lacking. The same with Plotinus, where all predicates fall short of the Absolute because each expresses a determination. The idea of the trinity or triad, already mentioned by Plato, develops in Proclus. This idea, along with the conception of the Absolute as Spirit, is the great step forward in philosophy implied by Christianity.

When the modern world began, Nicholas of Cusa was the heir of Neoplatonic and mystical traditions and the thinker who most powerfully expresses the human spirit's need to move beyond dualisms and antinomies by rising to that simplicity where opposites coincide. Cusanus was the first to recognize that this coincidence of opposites stands in contrast to the purely abstract logic of Aristotle, who conceived of contrariety as perfect difference.⁷ He did not accept that in unity there could be contraries, and he characterized each thing as the privation of its opposite. Against this view, Cusanus objected that unity comes before duality and that opposites coincide before they divide. But he thinks of the nexus of opposites as a simple coincidence that humans cannot grasp either by sense or by reason or by intellect, which are the three forms of the human mind. The nexus remains a mere limit. Of God, where all oppositions converge, the only knowledge allowed is an incomprehensible comprehension, a learned ignorance.⁸

With Giordano Bruno, who declares himself a disciple of 'the divine Cusanus,' this idea takes on a more positive function. He too celebrates the coincidence of opposites as the outstanding principle of a philosophy which has been forgotten and needs to be revived. He provides an eloquent account of the unification of contraries, of the greatest circle and the straight line, the acute angle and the obtuse, of heat and cold, corruption and generation, love and hate, poison and antidote, spherical and plane, concave and convex, anger and patience, humility and pride, greed and generosity.

Echoing Cusanus, he writes these memorable words: 'Anyone who wants to know nature's greatest secrets should look at the minima and maxima of contraries and opposites and think about them. There is deep magic in knowing how to draw out the contrary after locating the point of union. This is where poor Aristotle was heading with his notion of positing privation, conjoined with a particular disposition, as the ancestor, parent and mother of form, but he could not reach his goal. He could not get there because he planted his foot in the genus of opposition and stayed stuck there in such a way that he did not move down to the species of contrariety and could not succeed or even keep his eyes on the target. He missed it every time, claiming that contraries could not really come together in the same subject.'

From Bruno's naturalist perspective, the principle of the coincidence of opposites becomes a sort of aesthetic principle of thought: 'We take delight in color and especially one that includes all colors, not a single color defined in one way or another. We take delight in sound but not just one sound, rather the inclusive sound that comes from the harmony of many sounds. We take delight in a sensible but especially the sensible that comprehends in itself all sensibles, the knowable that comprehends every knowable, the

⁷Ἡ ἐναντιότης ἐστὶ διαφορὰ τέλειος; Arist. *Meta.* 1055^b.

⁸On Cusanus, see Fiorentino, *Il Risorgimento filosofico nel Quattrocento* (Naples, 1885), chapter 2.

apprehensible that embraces everything that can be apprehended, the one being that completes all, and, above all, the One which is itself the All.⁹ No longer a limitation, the principle has already become a power of the human mind, yet still not a rigorously logical power. It lacks justification in a theory of the concept.

The philosopher of Germany, Jakob Böhme, also strongly asserts the unity of opposites. He sets up antitheses in a rigorous way, says Hegel, but he does not let this rigor stop him, and he goes on to set up a unity. ‘Yes’ makes no sense to him without ‘no.’ God, the One, is unknowable in himself, and in order for him to be known, distinction is necessary, the Father duplicated in the Son. Böhme sees the triad in all things and deepens the understanding of the Christian trinity, but not even he manages to put his thoughts in a form appropriate to thinking.

The philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, having developed under the influence of the mathematical science of nature, was in no position to put the problem in this form appropriate to thinking. For Descartes, thought and extension are united in God in a way that we cannot comprehend. For Spinoza, substance is where they unite: the ‘mode,’ the third term after substance and attribute, does not give rise to a dialectical synthesis. Leibniz founders on the problem of evil and achieves a weak philosophical optimism. The popular philosophy of the eighteenth century resolves all oppositions in God, who thus becomes a complex of contradictions, the problem of problems.

Only in loners do we find a few hints and seeds of the dialectical solution – as in the philosopher of Italy, Giambattista Vico. He not only thinks *de facto* about life and history in a dialectical way, he is also driven by an aversion for Aristotelian logic and for the logic of Cartesian mathematics and physics. On the one hand, he also establishes a logic of imagination (a poetic logic) and of history (a logic of certainty); on the other hand, he recognizes the importance of the inductive logic of observation and experience as the prelude to a more concrete logic.

Another loner, close to Vico in many ways, was Johann Georg Hamann, whose personality combined all extremes at a high level, according to Jacobi. As a young man, he declared himself unsatisfied with the principles of identity and reason, but he found the coincidence of opposites attractive. Hamann had encountered this principle in Bruno’s book *On the Threefold Minimum and Measure*, and he carried it around ‘for years in his brain without being able to forget or to understand it.’ And yet it seemed to be ‘the only reason that accounts for all contradictions and shows the right way to sort them out and resolve them,’ putting an end to all the quarrels among advocates of abstraction.¹⁰ Interest in this principle passed from Hamann to Jacobi, who uncovered the passages in Bruno’s works that announce it. But his theory of direct knowledge put Jacobi in an impossible situation, and even though he was aware of the obstacle that he had run up against, he was unable to overcome it by logical thinking.

⁹Bruno, *De la causa, principio e uno*, dial. 5, near the end; *Dialoghi metafisici*, ed. Gentile (Bari: Laterza, 1907), pp. 255-7.

¹⁰For Hamann see Hegel, *Vermischte Schriften*, II, 36-7, 87-8.

To put the problem of opposites in a genuinely logical position and avoid the mystical and agnostic solution (which was no solution at all), what was needed was for the Kantian revolution to be completed. But Hamann regarded Kant's whole *Critique of Pure Reason* as much less important than Bruno's single statement about the principle of coincidence of opposites. Yet it was precisely in this *Critique* that Kant was the true author of the new coincidence of opposites, the new dialectic which is the logical theory of the dialectic.

Granted, Kant succumbed to the prevailing intellectualism and to the ideal of a mathematical science of nature – just like his immediate predecessors from Descartes to Leibniz and Hume. From this came his agnosticism, the phantom thing-in-itself, the abstraction of the categorical imperative and the servility toward traditional logic. At the same time, however, he maintains the distinction between understanding and reason and makes it more effective. In the *Critique of Judgment*, he announces a way of thinking reality which is no longer merely mechanical nor even the notion of external finality found in the eighteenth century but rather an internal finality. He catches a glimpse of the idea beyond the abstract concept. Even better, by clearly establishing the antinomies, Kant puts the problem of opposites on a new course. The antinomies appear to be insoluble, true, but in such way that the human mind's entanglement in them is necessary.

And what is most important – Kant's true glory – is his discovery of the synthetic *a priori*, but what is this if not 'an original synthesis of opposites,' as Hegel noted. With Kant this synthesis does not acquire its full meaning, its development in the triad of the dialectic. Once made public, however, it could not be long before synthesis revealed the riches within it. *A priori* synthesis causes transcendental logic to emerge alongside the old logic, at first parallel to the latter but in the end forcing its dissolution. The form of the threefold is also a major issue for Kant, who still treats it as something extrinsic yet uses it persistently, as if he had some presentiment of the better fate that it would soon enjoy.

The mission awaiting philosophy after Kant seems clear: developing the *a priori* synthesis, creating the new philosophical logic and solving the problem of opposites by eliminating the dualisms that Kant left intact or actually made stronger. And if we find little more substance in Fichte than in Kant, Fichte certainly makes it all simpler and more transparent. The thing in itself is rejected, while, at the same time, the concept of the *I* still keeps its subjective sense and does not achieve the true unity of subject and object, which leaves Fichte unsuccessful in justifying nature against spirit and, like Kant, stuck with faith and moral abstractions.

But the idea of the new logic became so much clearer that philosophy is conceived as a *theory of science*. The form of the threefold also acquires a dominant position and is characterized as thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Schelling takes another step forward when he becomes convinced that we can philosophize only by using the principle of the identity of opposites, and he conceives of the Absolute as that identity of opposites. But for Schelling the Absolute is something neutral between subject and object marked by merely quantitative differences. It is not yet subject and spirit. And his gnoseology lacks

a logic because for him aesthetic contemplation is the instrument of philosophy. This is the failing that Schelling could never overcome, and the consequences for him were so serious that they caused what has been called his second phase, the metaphysics of the irrational.

As we know, Hegel came later to the world of philosophy than Schelling, his younger contemporary, who can be called his disciple, in some sense. But where Schelling's journey ended was for Hegel part of the voyage, and Schelling's last phase, where the decay began, was a juvenile phase for Hegel. For some time, even Hegel recognized no other instrument for philosophy than aesthetic contemplation; the only intuition was intellectual intuition, and the only philosophical system was the work of art. In the first sketch of his system that survives, he too put religion, not philosophy, at the apex of the spirit's development.

But Hegel's deeply critical spirit eventually made him see that philosophy can have no other form than thinking, understood precisely in the special way that it differs from imagination and intuition. This thinking was obviously not the old logico-naturalist kind, which after Kant, Fichte and Schelling was no longer acceptable. The intellectualism of the two centuries preceding had been fatally wounded. There had to be a form of logic to preserve and strengthen philosophy's recent achievements, a form of logic that would be the form of the authentically real. Everything was pushing Hegel in this direction: his admiration for the harmony of the Greek world; his participation in the Romantic movement, so rich in conflicts; his theological studies, where the Christian idea of the Trinity, worn out or made vacuous by Protestant rationalism, seemed to him forced to find its refuge and true meaning in the new philosophy; and, finally, his theoretical studies on synthesis and Kant's antinomies.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), he parted ways with the philosophical movements to which he had belonged until then, and he published his principle for solving the problem of opposites. It is no longer simply their coinciding in some third term, unknown or unthinkable; no longer immobile unity; no longer Schelling's intuition; but unity and diversity together, movement and dialectic. The preface to the *Phenomenology* has been described as 'Hegel's farewell to Romanticism.' But the truth is that it was only thanks to Hegel's change that Romanticism was saved for philosophy. Only a Romantic who had in some sense overcome Romanticism could harvest its philosophical fruit.

The logic of the dialectic must therefore be regarded as truly Hegel's own discovery, as compared not only to those who came long before him, but also thinkers who were close to him. If proof of this were wanted, see how he conducted himself with these later figures. Having rejected Fichte, Kant would also have rejected Hegel, and more emphatically, because his philosophy did not contain the conditions needed to understand Hegel and thus to criticize him, really. But Hegel, who battled the false tendencies and features of Kant's philosophy in a decisive way, along with all the old rubbish scattered behind it, was also the one who made clear what it had to offer that was truly new and productive – so much so that it could be said that no one but Hegel has understood Kant.

Schelling always remained deaf and hostile to his former friend's conception. During the half century that he had still to live, he stubbornly opposed his own system, outdated and gone from bad to worse, to Hegel's. Sometimes (as in the famous preface to Cousin's *Fragments*), while violently rejecting Hegel's philosophy, Schelling also complains that he was robbed, though he never manages to state clearly what the other person robbed him of, nor even where his opponent had gone wrong. Hegel, on the other hand, continued to honor Schelling as the 'father of the new philosophy,' recognizing that he already had a glimmer of the dialectic and always calmly pointing out his strengths and weaknesses.

If a point of view shows itself more advanced by including views which are less advanced; if evidence of a theory's truth comes from its ability to provide both justification for truths discovered by others and an account of the mistakes associated with those truths, such evidence was not lacking in Hegel theory. Kant, who did not fully understand his own position, fell into the hands of neo-Kantians who turned away from his transcendental logic to a purely naturalist logic. Schelling, who did not fully understand his own position, ended up ingloriously as the second Schelling. But in connection with Hegel, the destiny of both thinkers was to become part of the grand conception produced by their intellectual heir, a nobler fate than providing exercises for the schoolroom or continuing alone in their lonely failure to understand themselves.